The Quiet

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The Quiet Season

The orchard stood bare under the grey sky, each tree like a figure from a forgotten procession—thin, twisted, and unmoving. The last apples had rotted into the grass weeks ago, picked over by crows, and now the ground was stiff with frost. Anastasia sat on the old bench beneath the elder tree, her hands folded inside her shawl. She had not spoken since morning.

Beyond the orchard, the house loomed with its sagging shutters and uneven stones, its pale facade now the same shade as the cold sky. It was not a grand estate. It had once been, when her grandfather kept horses and entertained officers, but now it was only wide, half-used, and quiet in a way that seemed to widen the rooms. Most of the halls stood dark even during the day. Her mother kept to the upstairs salon, where the samovar hissed without conversation. Her father—his mind fading with the seasons—moved through the rooms like a ghost who had forgotten what he was searching for. The servants, what few remained, walked quietly, as though afraid of being heard.

No one expected anything of Anastasia. She was not required to sew. Not required to entertain. She was not married, had no children, had no guests. Her presence neither brightened nor darkened the house. It was simply there, as her presence was. At thirty-two, she had become a figure of stillness, not quite mourned, but no longer awaited.

She did not regret her place. Or perhaps she did. It was difficult to tell the difference between peace and surrender after so many years of silence. Time no longer arrived in great events, but in smaller observations—the first frost, the thinning of the tea, her father's cough in the night, and the sound of leaves scraped along the stone steps by wind that never asked permission to enter.

She looked down. A sparrow hopped twice across the frozen path before her, its tiny claws ticking against the stone. It paused, pecked at something invisible, then darted beneath the bench. She listened to the sound of its wings, quick and hollow.

There had been a time when she tried to keep a journal. She had imagined writing poetry, or at least ordering her thoughts. But every time she took up the pen, the words turned inward, then sideways, and what she wished to say folded in on itself. Eventually, she let the blank pages stay blank. Her thoughts now remained where they belonged—inside.

The orchard gave no reply. It never did.

Sometimes, from the bench, she could hear the distant sound of chopping wood or the roll of a cart's wheels dragging through half-frozen mud. The village path curved just far enough away that the peasants' words reached her as murmurs, shapeless and low, like the voices of birds too far in the canopy. They moved through their days without pause—gathering, feeding, fetching, sewing, hauling water from the edge of the stream before it turned to ice. There was an order to their rhythm, though it looked exhausting. Every day filled with effort,

sweat, repetition. The women bent at the waist to stir boiling linen. The men with their sleeves rolled high, arguing over rope or pigs or stone.

She watched them as one watches the labor of ants. They were alive in a way she was not. Their backs ached, their hands cracked, their sleep was deep. Even the worn-faced girls with their red woolen kerchiefs and soiled aprons had the advantage of utility. They were needed. Their tasks, though endless and low, belonged to the world.

She had no task. No appointed hour. No reason to rise except that she had not yet died. When her mother sent for her to drink tea, she did. When the doctor came, she stayed out of sight. Once a month, she dusted the volumes in the drawing room, though no one read them but her. She had once tried to help with the baking, but the dough did not rise under her fingers, and the cook, not unkindly, had stopped asking.

She had no place in the village. She was neither wife nor widow, neither poor nor rich, neither healer nor fool. She was a shade drifting along the edge of use, invisible and unnecessary.

Even her embroidery, once meant to occupy idle hours, had grown stiff and joyless. The thread tangled, the needle slipped, and more often than not, she simply stared at the linen without moving her hand. The little birds she once stitched now looked starved and deformed.

They say that idleness poisons the soul. But what they never speak of is how work, too, can poison, when the only purpose of labor is to survive a system that never asked whether one belonged in it. She had heard once from a cousin visiting from Moscow that women in the city had begun teaching, writing, organizing charities. There were salons, lectures, debates.

But in the village, what was a woman without dowry, without husband, without charm, and with a body that ached when the weather changed?

She shifted slightly on the bench, her joints stiff in the cold. A thought came, sharp and uninvited: perhaps she was not broken. Perhaps the system itself had never been built for anyone like her.

The sparrow emerged again from beneath the bench and took flight. She watched it vanish toward the chimney, and when it was gone, she felt even more still than before.

A gust moved through the orchard, lifting a handful of dead leaves and casting them against the crooked fence. Anastasia drew her shawl tighter, though the cold had long since seeped into her bones. It was always in her now—beneath the skin, behind the eyes, like an old sadness that no longer needed a reason.

She had been called delicate since childhood. At first with fondness, later with inconvenience. As a girl, she was often sent to lie down in the middle of the day, even when she insisted she felt fine. Her governess would press a cool hand to her forehead, whisper something about nerves, and draw the curtains. In truth, the headaches had been real, the

fevers too. There had been blood once, the kind that made her mother pale and silent for days. But it was not the pain that lingered in memory. It was the long hours in bed, listening to life continue without her—her brothers laughing in the field, the kitchen clatter of guests arriving, the sound of music echoing from the drawing room below.

“Even then,” Anastasia thought, “the world was politely passing me by.”

The doctors were never certain. One said it was the heart, another the digestion. A third blamed her temperament, her reading habits, her sensitivity to sound. She was told to avoid excitement, not to bathe too cold, not to think too much. She was given tonics that stained her teeth and powders that made her dizzy. Sometimes the remedies caused more illness than the illness itself.

By sixteen, the verdict was fixed: she was not fit for the strain of married life. Her name was no longer spoken in matchmaker’s circles. Her mother stopped inviting visiting officers for supper. Instead, she was given books and told that solitude might suit her. And in time, she stopped waiting for invitations to dances. She had never worn a silk gown. She had never been kissed. She had once held hands with a boy beneath a lilac tree, but he had laughed at something she said and never returned.

“Perhaps I was never meant for touch,” she thought. “Only for watching.”

And so, the seasons turned and she remained still while others moved forward. Her cousins married, bore children, traveled abroad. The village girls married peasants or widowers and took on the shape of their new households like clay pressed into a mold. And Anastasia sat in the library, folded into the corner of an armchair, reading foreign novels whose heroines were always too brave or too pretty to resemble her at all.

Sometimes she imagined herself a character in those stories, a woman misunderstood by fate—noble in sorrow, kissed by some quiet disaster. But even that became unbearable. There was no dignity in real illness. Only the slow narrowing of days, the quiet habits of managing discomfort, the humiliation of being weak in front of others.

She leaned back on the bench, listening to her breath mist in the air. Her lungs ached faintly. It would snow before nightfall.

“I suppose I have lived too gently,” she thought. “But no one taught me how to live any other way.”

The wind had settled now, and with it, the orchard grew silent again. No birds, no footsteps, no sounds from the house. The kind of stillness that made one aware of every breath, every blink. Anastasia let her gaze fall across the bare tree limbs, their branches held stiff like arms raised in surrender.

She thought of her schooling then—those narrow rooms, the damp chalk smell, the rows of identical girls reciting French verbs with flat voices. The governess had worn stiff sleeves and spoke often of duty. There were lessons in embroidery, piano, catechism, and restraint.

Always restraint. Laughter was discouraged unless delicate. Curiosity was permitted only in matters of poetry or history—never in how things worked, or why injustice existed, or where the money came from to keep the samovar full each morning.

"We were trained like dogs," Anastasia thought. "Taught to sit, to smile, to obey—without barking too loud or running too far."

Her father once said the purpose of a good education was to keep a woman from making a fool of herself at the dinner table. He meant it kindly. He meant everything kindly. The kindness was the worst part of it. It dulled the edge of protest. Made rebellion seem not brave, but impolite.

They had taught her not how to live, but how to present herself in the presence of others who mattered more. She remembered the long hours at the piano, her fingers aching, her mind wandering to the window, where the cook's boy ran through mud and shouted nonsense. He was shouted at too, beaten sometimes, but no one told him to smile when he was tired. No one punished him for speaking with too much feeling.

"Because I was born with the right name, I was trained to become no one," she thought.

She had been told to marry a man of means. But her dowry, thin as it was, had vanished with the land reforms. She was told to behave as a lady, but the village had no ballroom. She was instructed to walk slowly, avoid direct stares, and be patient. But for what? No one had ever said. Patience, she suspected, was just a way to stretch a woman's useless years into something resembling virtue.

She had tried once to speak sharply in class, to question the purpose of Latin declensions or the fables of the saints. She had been called ill-mannered. Her mother took away her books for a week. Her silence returned quickly after that.

"I was not raised for life," Anastasia thought. "Only for approval."

And yet no approval ever came. Not from the village, where she was regarded with polite suspicion. Not from the family, who saw in her the sadness they refused to name. Not from God, who had stayed silent all these years, no matter how long she stared into the candle flame.

Somewhere beyond the orchard, a dog barked, once, then was still. The sky above was the color of metal.

From where she sat, Anastasia could see the corner of the house where her parents' windows faced the orchard. The curtains were drawn, as always, even in daylight. Her mother said the sun faded the rugs. But Anastasia suspected she simply preferred not to see the world anymore. It was easier that way. Easier to live among porcelain and sighs and half-remembered obligations than to look out and find nothing looking back.

Her father had once been a strong man. Not kind, but fair in the way that men pride themselves on being when they have power and no one to challenge it. He rarely raised his

voice, and when he did, it was never to her. He had been proud of her reading, proud of her memory, and even more proud of her silence. She was never wild, never loud, never asked for more than what was offered.

Now he spent his days walking the halls in his felt slippers, moving papers from one desk to another, forgetting why he had stood up, then sitting again. Sometimes he spoke of the tsar as though he still served him. Sometimes he asked after cousins who had been dead ten years. Once he mistook her for the housemaid and asked for broth. She gave it to him without correcting him.

Her mother still dressed each morning with care—lace cuffs, a shawl pinned at the shoulder—but she rarely spoke. They took tea together most afternoons, seated by the tiled stove, her mother sipping slowly while Anastasia let hers go cold. Their conversations floated just above the surface, like insects on water. Remarks about the weather. The price of flour. How well the cat had kept mice away this winter.

There was no cruelty in the house. No drunkenness or shouting or doors slammed in rage. Only the hush of habit, the long-standing truce between people who had learned not to expect warmth.

Touch had faded early in her life, not with malice, but with the quiet efficiency of fading importance. No one had held her hand since she was a girl. There were no embraces when she retired for the night, no hand at her back when she left a room, no touch on her shoulder during those cold months when the light failed before supper.

“Perhaps my skin forgot the sensation,” she thought. “Perhaps that part of me has already died.”

She had once dreamed of hands—rough or soft, she did not care—reaching for her, not to lead or to scold, but to pull her close without hesitation. She could no longer recall the feeling of warmth shared between bodies. Not even in sleep. Her own hands were thin, pale, calloused only by pages and embroidery needles.

No one reached for her, not even in memory.

The house was not cruel. It was just quiet. And in its quiet, her soul had settled like dust on untouched furniture—present, motionless, forgotten.

The Visit of the Doctor

From behind the parlor door, Anastasia could hear the doctor’s voice—a slow, considered baritone, punctuated by the occasional polite cough, the sound of a chair leg scraping against the floor, the rustle of papers. Her father never spoke louder than necessary anymore, and today was no exception. His replies were muffled, brief.

She stood in the hallway, her hand resting lightly on the wall where the wallpaper had begun to peel. The light from the tall windows slanted across the parquet floor, catching on the dust that never fully left the air. The doctor came twice a year, sometimes less. He traveled from the nearest town, always with the same brown bag, the same weary nods. He was not young, but younger than her father, and possessed the calm efficiency of a man who has long ceased to be shocked by what he sees.

Anastasia had grown to hate that calmness.

"It is not that we die," she thought, "but that we die in stages, under observation, recorded in someone else's ledger. That is the part I find unbearable."

The doctor would nod and make a note. He would suggest softer foods, less salt, warmer clothes. He would give no promises and no cause for alarm. And still, her father’s steps had shortened. His hands trembled when he held the glass. His voice sometimes failed him halfway through a sentence. But nothing was urgent enough to call it dying. Not yet.

"This is the bureaucracy of death," she thought, "where a man fades by increments, while others speak of it with measured courtesy, as if to offend the decline would be in poor taste."

She wondered how many homes the doctor visited in a week. How many staircases he climbed. How many chairs he lowered himself into, only to say the same things in different words. Perhaps there was comfort in that—being ordinary even in decay. Or perhaps it was just another kind of forgetting. To die slowly, surrounded by people who no longer knew what to say, who changed the subject, who smiled too gently.

The sound of porcelain shifting on the tray reached her ear—the maid had brought in tea. She imagined the doctor lifting his cup, speaking in low tones while her father blinked and nodded. She had not heard her father laugh in years. Not truly. Not from the chest.

"Old age," she thought, "is not a punishment. But it is no mercy either."

She had once feared a violent death—fever, bleeding, a sudden fall—but now she feared the soft erosion more: the months that pass in forgetfulness, the breath that shortens unnoticed, the names that disappear from memory like dust swept from the sill. No one screams. No one breaks the silence. And then one day, the chair remains empty, and the tea goes cold, and that too becomes routine.

She turned from the door and walked slowly down the hallway, her steps inaudible on the worn rug.

"I wonder," she thought, "if I have already begun to die, in some quieter way. If I too have been catalogued, examined, noted, and dismissed as stable."

She paused at the window at the end of the corridor, where the glass warped the world slightly at the corners. The orchard beyond looked as if it were underwater, the trees bending subtly, the frost on the ground glistening like a brittle crust. A bird passed close to the pane and vanished again.

She could still hear the murmur of voices behind her, and then, distinct among them, the doctor’s low laugh. It was soft, brief, but clear. A perfectly ordinary sound, the kind of sound one might hear at market or after supper among neighbors. But within her it landed with a strange weight. She closed her eyes. For a moment she imagined him turning in the chair to look at her, not with obligation, but with notice—with recognition. She imagined his hands, large and capable, brushing a hair from her face, his coat smelling of wool and earth, his voice lowering not out of politeness, but tenderness.

She drew in a breath and opened her eyes.

"No," she thought quickly, sharply. "That is not permitted. That is not the kind of woman I am."

It came like a reflex, that recoil. The body remembering its station, the mind correcting itself before the thought had time to grow limbs. She had long ago accepted that such feelings had no place in her life, that to desire was to invite humiliation. And besides, he was a man of the world. He traveled, he saw people, he touched the living and the dying without flinching. What could she, a woman grown thin from solitude, offer to someone like that?

And yet, her skin still burned where the thought had passed. She turned from the window and pressed her palm to the glass, as if the cold might draw out the warmth rising in her chest.

"Perhaps I am not immune after all," she thought bitterly. "Even stones remember what it is to be warm, once touched by sun."

She heard his chair scrape again. The visit would soon be over. Soon he would rise, adjust his coat, and offer the same parting words he always did: something respectful, something hollow. She would not see him. She would not enter the room. It was better that way. To be unseen was to be safe.

Still, as she stepped away from the window, her hand left a faint print in the frost on the pane —a soft shape, already fading.

She returned to her room, moving without sound, as she had learned to do long ago. The door clicked shut behind her, and she stood for a moment, glancing toward the long oval mirror propped against the wall. The fire in the stove had dwindled, leaving the air thin and chill, but she did not cross the room. She only watched herself from the threshold.

The woman in the mirror looked taller than she felt. Pale. Not beautiful, but not grotesque either. Her face held no deformity, no obvious flaw. And yet there was something unfinished about it, like a sculpture abandoned before the final stroke. Her shoulders sloped inward, not from age but from habit, as though she had always expected too much of the world and had learned to expect less.

Her eyes lingered on her neck—thin, a little long. Her wrists, delicate. Her waist, narrow but without purpose. She had no softness where softness was admired. No lushness of hip, no color in her cheeks unless fever stirred it.

“I am a body built for forgetting,” she thought. “Not for desire, not for gaze, not even for memory. Just enough to exist, not enough to be wanted.”

There had been a time, perhaps when she was eighteen, when she thought it might happen. That a man might see her. Not just glance, but see. But they looked past her, or through her, or with eyes that said polite things and quickly turned elsewhere. Even when they smiled, she could sense the strain—the effort not to offend, not to speak what they truly thought. She had never inspired the boldness of love, nor even the cruelty of lust. Not once had a man placed his hand on her arm without calculation. Not once had someone reached for her as if compelled.

She touched her own fingers lightly to her collarbone. The skin was cool. There was no response.

“I’ve lived beside my body like a stranger,” she thought, “as if it were a guest I was never introduced to. It moves, it breathes, it weakens—but it is not mine in any familiar sense. And it has never belonged to anyone else.”

She could remember moments when she had tried to adorn it. A necklace once, simple pearls. A touch of perfume. Once she had curled her hair, copying a style from a magazine sent from Petersburg. But each effort only made her feel like a child in costume—something unnatural, something pitied. Her mother had smiled kindly and said, “Don’t force what isn’t yours, Nastya.”

She hadn’t tried again.

The mirror reflected her still, now slightly dimmed as the sun slipped lower. She watched her face as if waiting for something to emerge—beauty, strength, a trace of warmth—but it remained as it was. A quiet mask of a life half-lived.

She stepped away, letting the folds of her dress fall back into their usual shape. Whatever there had once been in her to desire had either never awakened or had gone back to sleep without making a sound.

She sat by the stove now, near the small iron grate where the fire cracked but did not sing. Her hands, resting in her lap, bore the look of quiet industry—though no industry had come from them in days. She stared into the embers and remembered her own youth as one might recall a distant town visited once and never returned to, seen only through rain.

At thirteen, she had been thin and pale, always recovering from something—a fever, a cough, an unnamed weakness that seemed to hover in her chest like a small animal that would not die and would not flee. While the other girls played in the garden, cheeks flushed, hair wild, she sat on a blanket with a shawl around her shoulders, watching. Her legs were too weak to run. Her breath caught too quickly. She smiled when they looked at her, but they rarely did for long.

There was one girl, Irina, with thick hair and bold steps, who once tried to teach her to skip rope. She remembered Irina's hands gripping her own, the shock of contact, the laughter that rose and faded as Anastasia stumbled, tangled in the rope, and fell to her knees. The scrape had bled, not deeply, but it had been enough to send her indoors, where the governess scolded Irina and told Anastasia to rest again. After that, no one asked her to play.

She watched the others instead, as they grew into themselves. Their bodies changed. Their voices deepened. They spoke in lower tones and laughed behind their hands, looking out of windows with secrets in their eyes. By sixteen, they spoke of suitors and dresses, of dances and flowers sent without names attached. And Anastasia remained in the same chair, her books open on her lap, her frame still slight, her body unchanged, as though time had moved past her out of respect.

"There must have been something wrong in the making of me," she thought. "Some small slip in design. A clock wound too gently. A seed that never fully rooted."

She remembered how they looked at her—when they looked at all. The pity, the politeness, the quiet assumption that she would always be nearby, always listening, always still. The boys nodded to her as they would to a portrait in a hallway—acknowledging her presence without ever truly seeing her.

Once, she had braided her hair to match the others and stood beside them in the mirror. But her skin seemed too pale beside their color. Her eyes did not sparkle. Her shoulders curved inward instead of rising with pride. She looked like the shadow of a girl standing among real ones.

And yet the ache was there, even then—the desire not to be beautiful, not even to be loved, but simply to belong. To be included without question. To be called from across the field and asked to run, to laugh, to be missed when absent.

"That girl is still somewhere inside me," Anastasia thought. "Watching from the blanket. Still waiting to be called."

The fire had begun to die. She leaned forward and fed it a few pieces of wood, listening to the pop and hiss as flame clung weakly to the edges. The room smelled of smoke and wool, and the shadows on the walls moved like breath—faint, trembling, unsure whether to stay or vanish.

Anastasia rested her chin against her hand, eyes fixed on the burning grate, and thought of the word they had used so often, so carelessly: woman.

She had heard it since she was a child—spoken with reverence, with warning, with instruction. A woman must be gentle, quiet, clean, adorned but not proud, obedient but not simple. A woman must be pleasing in manner, soft in speech, firm in virtue. And when the time came, she must give herself to a man, carry his name, his child, his world. That was the rhythm. That was the form. Her books were filled with such women. Her teachers praised them. Her mother imitated them.

But what if that path was never offered?

“What becomes of a woman,” she thought, “when no one calls her into that shape? When no hand reaches for hers, no name is joined to hers, no child is born of her body? Am I still one? Or am I something else—a shell of the word, hollow, unfulfilled, like a cup never poured into?”

She had tried once, briefly, to mimic the patterns. To lower her eyes, to walk with grace, to nod and smile and play the part. But it had felt like wearing someone else's skin. Her movements came late. Her smile never reached far enough. She could never find the pitch of that voice the others had, that floating, teasing tone like wind through lace.

She had no sisters, but she had watched enough girls grow into womanhood to see the transformation: the way they began to carry themselves differently, how their gazes deepened with awareness. She remembered seeing her cousin Olga at seventeen, hair pinned high, her arm hooked around the elbow of a cavalry officer, her laugh light and intoxicating, like perfume. Olga had turned to her once and said, “You must learn to be a mystery, Nastya. That’s all men want.”

“But I was never a mystery,” Anastasia thought. “Only a silence.”

Her body had remained reluctant. It never learned the language of flirtation, of rhythm, of heat. Her periods came irregularly, without drama, as though even her womb had no faith in her purpose. Her hips stayed narrow. Her skin stayed pale. No one asked her to dance. No one asked if she had danced. Over time, it became understood—she was not the type.

Womanhood became something she watched in others like a distant ritual, one she had neither rejected nor joined, merely missed. A procession that passed before she knew it had begun.

“Perhaps I am a third thing,” she thought. “Not child, not woman—only this. A witness to what might have been.”

She stirred the fire again, but the flame was thin. It would go out before supper. She did not move to add more wood.

The morning passed without thought. The sky hung low, a uniform pale sheet with no sun behind it. Anastasia dressed slowly, tying the gray shawl around her shoulders not for style or comfort, but because it was there. In the kitchen, the cook was humming a wordless tune while kneading dough. Anastasia did not speak. She took the broom from beside the stove and swept the hallway—each stroke soft, mechanical, stirring little more than dust and memory.

At the stairs she paused, turned back. There was no reason to go up. Her mother would still be sleeping, or pretending to, and the upstairs rooms smelled of starch and sleep and silence. She went instead to the barn.

Outside, the air bit her cheeks gently. The path to the barn was half-mud, half-frozen, and her boots sank just enough to make walking unpleasant. The geese hissed from the pen as she passed, and the dog—an old, sleepy creature who barked more from habit than conviction—gave a single sound before settling again.

Inside the barn, it was warmer. Not from heat, but from the breath of animals. The cow watched her with indifferent eyes. The hens made their small muttering sounds. She scattered seed, checked the water. The smell was strong—hay, manure, dust—but not unpleasant. Not anymore. She had come to prefer it to the smell of perfume and waxed floors.

One of the cats followed her out, winding around her legs as she walked toward the edge of the forest. She passed the orchard bench without sitting. The trees there were still bare, and she had no thoughts she wanted to hear just then.

The forest accepted her presence without remark. Dry twigs snapped beneath her feet, and a crow cried once overhead, then fell quiet. She did not go far. Only until she could no longer see the roof of the house. She stood a while, breathing the scent of cold bark and damp earth. There was peace in being surrounded by things that required nothing of her. Trees did not care whether she spoke, whether she smiled, whether she had fulfilled her use.

On the way back, she stopped by the well and drank from the ladle. The water was sharp, clean, as if it had forgotten the taste of pipe and metal. Her hands stung from the cold.

She ate alone, as usual. A slice of bread, a soft-boiled egg, weak tea. The silver was dull, the porcelain chipped, but the tray was arranged neatly, and that gave her some quiet pleasure. She took the tea to the sitting room and sat in the old armchair facing the stove. Her hands curled around the cup.

For a moment, she simply sat. No thoughts pressed inward. No memory knocked. The world, for a small interval, simply was.

Later, she would read. She would sweep the crumbs from the floor. She might light a candle before supper, or not. At dusk, she would wash her hands and stare out the window before going to sleep. Her breath would rise and fall in darkness.

The day passed, like many others before it. Unmarked, but whole.

The Path Through the Woods

The birch forest began where the last outbuildings ended, a thin white wall of trunks rising from the ground like a gathering of quiet figures. Anastasia stepped into it slowly, her boots sinking into the softening earth. A thin crust of snow clung to the leaves, delicate as breath on glass. The air carried that particular stillness that comes before snowfall, as if the world had drawn in a long, suspended breath.

She wrapped the wool tighter around her shoulders, though the cold was not what unsettled her. It was the sense—faint but steady—that something within her shifted when she entered the trees, something loosening, as though her body were a garment she could slip out of if she only walked far enough.

“Perhaps I could go on,” she thought, “just keep walking until the house vanishes behind the branches, until the village is nothing but a memory someone else had. What would stop me? What holds me here, except habit?”

The wind answered nothing. A thin flake of snow drifted down and melted against her cheek.

She imagined herself moving deeper, past the familiar paths, past the old hunters’ tracks, into the regions where even the peasants rarely went. She pictured the trees closing around her, their white trunks multiplying until they formed a corridor without end. She imagined how her footprints would look in the gathering snow—two narrow lines leading nowhere.

“There are women who vanish,” she thought. “Not kidnapped, not stolen, simply… gone. The world does not stop for them. The earth accepts them as it accepts fallen leaves.”

The notion didn’t frighten her. It softened something in her chest. She could almost see herself stepping quietly into that disappearance, leaving behind the cold parlor, the thin tea, the doctor’s polite eyes, the mirror with its silent verdict. No more slow meals. No more empty rooms. No more waiting for a voice to call her name when none ever would.

“What if this is the doorway?” she wondered. “What if the trees have been waiting all this time?”

She paused beside one of the larger birches, its trunk marked by a long scar of missing bark. Her gloved fingers traced the roughness, the wound of it. The tree stood without complaint, upright, patient.

“I could be patient like this,” she thought. “Rooted nowhere. Seen by no one. Alive, but untouched.”

The forest was quiet enough that she heard her own breath as if it belonged to someone walking just beside her. A thin mist coiled between the trunks. The sky above had turned the color of old linen—soft, blank, heavy with coming snow.

She stepped forward again. The earth yielded beneath her boots. The branches whispered overhead, the sound thin and brittle, like distant voices calling her name in a language she almost understood.

She walked deeper, the forest bending gently around her, each tree spaced with a kind of silent order, as if arranged by a hand that understood solitude. The air grew cooler the farther she went, and the light dimmed, though no clouds had yet thickened. The birches, with their pale, peeling bark and narrow limbs, stretched up like arms in prayer, or surrender. She had always loved this place, not for its beauty, but for its refusal to demand anything of her.

The forest asked no questions. It made no remark on her absence or presence. It did not gaze at her with expectation. It simply stood—aloof, unjudging, endless.

“All my life,” Anastasia thought, “I have looked without touching. Observed without entering. This, perhaps, is the shape of me. The one who watches.”

The trees mirrored her—silent, slender, reserved. Each year they shed their leaves without complaint. Each year they endured the cold without protest. They did not perform joy. They did not reach toward anyone. And in that, they felt like kin.

She paused by a small clearing where snow had begun to gather in thin patches across the ground, white clinging to the moss and rotted branches. A crow flapped once, startled by her approach, then lifted off and vanished behind the trees. Even that small eruption of movement seemed more vivid than anything she had done in weeks.

“Even the birds act,” she thought. “They decide, they move, they make their claim on the air. And I—” she stopped the thought there, not from reluctance, but from weariness. The conclusion was always the same.

There had been moments in her youth when she imagined life beginning. That some change would arrive—a letter, a visitor, a sudden talent awakened in her—and the veil between her and the world would lift. But it never came. She had remained behind the glass, watching others laugh, suffer, argue, grieve. Their sorrows seemed louder, their joys brighter. They belonged to the world. They struggled within it.

“I have not even struggled properly,” she thought. “I’ve floated. Like a ghost who forgets she’s dead.”

The sound of snow falling from a high branch broke the stillness. She looked up. A handful of flakes drifted through the air, soft, without direction. They landed on her sleeves, her hair, her breath.

The trees remained. The forest, indifferent, stood unchanged.

And so did she.

As the snow settled in thin webs on the sleeves of her coat, Anastasia moved into a clearing where the trees bent inwards slightly, like tall women gossiping at a distance. The light was flat now, soft, without shadow, and the air had the stillness of a room just after someone has left it.

She stood a while, and memory, without warning, stepped beside her.

A summer long ago. The garden alive with buzzing, the hydrangeas heavy with color. She had been perhaps ten, her dress stiff with starch, her knees bandaged from a fall days earlier. She sat on a stone near the fountain, watching the older girls run—hair undone, cheeks flushed, ribbons falling from their braids like spent petals. They played a game of chase,

shrieking, laughing, tumbling into the grass, their arms flung around one another without hesitation.

Irina was there again. Always Irina, tall for her age, fearless, the center of every circle. She had seen Anastasia sitting alone and shouted something—half an invitation, half a joke—but Anastasia had only smiled weakly and waved them on. Her leg hurt. Her chest felt tight. But it wasn't the body that stopped her.

"I didn't know how to be among them," she thought. "Not because they wouldn't let me. Because I didn't understand the current they swam in, that easy joy, the rhythm of bodies not burdened by thought."

They had played games of husbands and wives, building homes from garden branches, pretending to scold imaginary children, offering kisses with exaggerated flourish. She had tried once to join, offering a bit of ribbon as her dowry. But when she mimicked the voice of a mother or a bride, the others had laughed—lightly, not cruelly, but with that effortless dismissal that children wield without knowing they wound.

After that, she remained the watcher. Holding their secrets in silence, knowing which girl loved which boy, which games would end in tears. She was the one who was always present but never pivotal, the one who could be forgotten for an hour and not be missed.

"I learned early that envy was best kept quiet," she thought. "Because what I envied could not be earned or stolen or shaped. It was simply given to others."

They bloomed, one by one, as girls do. The swell of hip, the darkening of lashes, the awareness in their eyes that the world would soon respond to them. Anastasia had waited for that shift in herself with a kind of dread, and a strange hope. But it had never arrived. Her voice stayed too soft. Her frame too light. Her movements unsure.

The memory faded like fog. She looked now at the bare trees surrounding her. No laughter. No girls. Only snow whispering against bark and the small press of her boots into the softened path.

"I was not made for play," she thought. "And now there is no one left to play with."

She continued walking, her steps soundless against the thin hush of snow. The forest did not thicken, nor open—it simply remained, as it always did, indifferent to her passage. The wind shifted faintly, and a strand of hair escaped beneath her scarf and brushed her cheek like a finger that meant nothing.

The path ahead disappeared gradually, swallowed by the pale drift gathering beneath the trees. There was no direction, no urgency, and so she followed nothing.

It was here, among the stillness, that the thought returned again, as it had many times before—not as panic, not even sorrow, but a kind of distant door opening gently on its hinges.

“Perhaps,” she thought, “one could simply lie down. Not now. Not with ceremony. Just one day, when the walking no longer seems necessary.”

There would be no letters to write, no will to sign. No one would ask where she had gone. The cook would assume she was asleep. Her mother would forget the hour. Masha might knock at the door and wait, uncertain, before going away. And the forest would take her. Not violently. Just... patiently. Like water smoothing stone.

She paused and looked up. The sky, pale and endless, pressed low against the treetops. It was neither cruel nor kind. It simply was.

Death, as she understood it, had no sharp edge. It was not the scream in the night or the gasp of final illness. It was the slow thinning of presence. A fading out, like smoke in a cold room. Her father was already vanishing in that manner. Her mother too, though her hands still moved with purpose.

“If I vanished,” she thought, “who would be the first to speak my name aloud? And would it be from care, or simply from confusion?”

The question held no bitterness, only a quiet weight.

She did not long for death. That was not the shape of the thought. It was only that life no longer clung to her in the way it did to others. She did not fear absence. She had lived beside it long enough to understand its softness. And when the time came—if it came quietly—she imagined she would not fight. She would only stop walking, sit beneath a tree, and listen to the silence move through her one last time.

“It would not be such a terrible thing,” she thought. “To be covered gently. To belong to the earth more fully than I ever belonged to anyone.”

A deeper cold slipped into the air, the kind that carried warning more than discomfort. The first real snow began to fall—slow, deliberate flakes drifting in a tilted pattern, settling on the sleeves of her coat in delicate constellations. The light dimmed further, though it was still early afternoon. In the forest, time often faltered like this, pausing long enough to unsettle the senses.

Anastasia stood under a birch whose branches bowed slightly under their own thinness. She brushed a clump of snow from her shoulder, watching it fall soundlessly to the ground. The thought crossed her—quiet, unhurried—that she could stay. The cold would deepen, yes. The light would fail. But the forest did not mind her presence. It never had. She could sit against the tree, draw her shawl close, close her eyes, and let the snow cover her like a second skin.

But even that fantasy dissolved as quickly as it came. The forest was not a refuge, only a possibility. And possibilities were not destinations.

She turned, not with resolve, but with the familiar weight of inevitability. The path back was faint, already softened by falling snow, but she knew its curves. Her boots found the old

depressions without thought. The trees thinned gradually, their white trunks giving way to the darker shapes of the outbuildings and the field beyond.

“With each step,” she thought, “I return not out of desire, but because I have nowhere else to be.”

A crow watched her from a branch, its feathers dark against the pale distance. It tilted its head as she passed, then lost interest. She understood the indifference. She felt no offense.

The house came into view—its roof bowed under the weight of early winter, its windows dim, the chimney exhaling a thin ribbon of smoke. It looked exactly as she had left it, as it had looked every day for years: a place neither welcoming nor hostile, simply existent. A structure to shelter bodies, not a home to hold souls.

She paused once more at the edge of the orchard. The bench sat empty, dusted with snow, its wood darkening as the flakes melted against it. She imagined herself sitting there again, watching the sparrows pick at what little remained on the ground. Another day, perhaps. Another silence.

She crossed the yard. Her steps were slow, though not from reluctance. The cold stung her cheeks; the shawl clung close. The door creaked as she pushed it open.

Inside, the air smelled of tea and dust and the faint traces of her mother’s perfume. No voice called out. No footstep approached. Nothing acknowledged her return.

She closed the door behind her.

“I came back,” she thought, “because return is all I have ever learned.”

The fire in Anastasia’s room had burned low. Its orange light flickered faintly across the ceiling, casting thin shapes that moved like breath. She lay still beneath the heavy quilt, her hands resting above her stomach, her eyes closed though not quite in sleep. The house had grown quiet around her. The walls creaked softly in the wind. Somewhere downstairs, the dog gave a single sigh and shifted in its sleep.

She drifted slowly, neither fully dreaming nor fully waking. Her mind floated through fragments—familiar rooms altered by shadow, faces she couldn’t name, a candle held in the wind. The feeling was neither pleasant nor troubling. It was simply the place she often went when the weight of thought had settled.

Downstairs, in the kitchen warmed by the brick stove, her parents sat close to the table, each with a half-full glass of weak cherry cordial. The samovar hissed quietly behind them, and the plates from supper had been cleared but not yet washed.

“She went to the woods again,” her mother said, voice low but not whispering. “Came back with snow in her hair. Didn’t speak a word.”

Her father sniffed. He folded his hands over his belly and stared at the knot in the woodgrain on the table. “She’s always doing that. Wandering like a ghost. Never did like to stay indoors.”

“She never liked to stay anywhere,” her mother replied. She sipped from her glass, winced slightly at the sourness, then smiled without mirth. “Not a house, not a crowd, not even her own skin, I think.”

He chuckled—a short, tired sound. “She used to speak more. When she was little. Always asking questions. Wore us out with them.”

“She read too much,” her mother said. “That was the beginning of it. Those little French novels and English poems. You remember how she copied verses into her sewing book instead of doing the hems?”

“She never did finish a proper piece of lace,” he said.

They both sat quietly for a moment. The stove popped. A spoon shifted in a glass.

“She’s not ill,” her mother said, though the tone made it a question.

“No,” he answered. “Not in the way a doctor could treat. It’s something else. Something soft, in the head. Like she never learned how to want what others want.”

His wife leaned back in her chair, her eyes on the dark window. “Sometimes I wonder what she waits for. She doesn’t laugh. Doesn’t cry. Just sits, and watches things. It’s unnatural. Makes a person uneasy.”

He poured the last of the cordial into his glass and drank it in a single swallow. “She’s harmless.”

“She’s strange,” her mother said.

Upstairs, Anastasia turned in her sleep. Her breath caught for a moment, then slowed again. No dreams stirred behind her closed eyes. Only the sound of voices through the floorboards, muffled, but not lost.

The Servant Girl

Masha stood at the window, shaking crumbs from the cloth with short, precise flicks of her wrist. Her apron was tied tightly around her waist, hair pinned high and neat, though strands had begun to loosen with the day’s movement. The snow outside had grown heavier, falling in steady silence across the yard.

Anastasia entered the room quietly, as she always did. Masha turned, offered a shallow curtsy, her expression pleasant but unreadable. They stood for a moment, the space between them filled with nothing in particular.

“Will your Pavel be visiting for the holidays?” Anastasia asked, her voice soft, careful not to break the strange balance between them.

Masha’s face lit, slightly. “Yes, if the roads stay open. He’s promised to come with the cart and bring flour from his brother’s mill.”

“Good,” Anastasia replied, eyes resting on the cloth in the girl’s hands. “You’ll be married by spring?”

“We hope so,” Masha said, with the smile of someone for whom hope had weight and use.

Anastasia nodded, then looked away. There was nothing more to say that would not cross the line they both understood. She stepped to the stove and adjusted the kettle though it didn’t need adjusting.

Behind her, Masha folded the cloth and placed it back in the drawer.

“I remember being sixteen,” Anastasia thought. “But I do not remember smiling like that. Not for anyone.”

She envied the girl—not for her youth, not even for her beauty, which was simple and passing—but for the clarity of her life. Masha would marry. She would bear children. Her hands would grow coarse, her back bent from labor, her face lined early. But the path was there. And Masha would walk it without ever questioning why.

“She’ll never sit awake at night wondering if she is real,” Anastasia thought. “She will have tasks. She will be tired. She will be needed.”

And yet, there was something in her that recoiled, too. That hated the way the girl smiled at the mention of a man, the way she spoke of marriage as though it were a prize. As though it were proof of her belonging.

“It’s so simple for them,” Anastasia thought bitterly. “A man, a room, a child. That’s all it takes to be real.”

Masha excused herself with a soft word and left the room, her steps light, her figure vanishing quickly into the corridor. Anastasia remained by the stove, staring into the kettle, though it gave her no reflection.

“She’s not unkind,” Anastasia thought. “But I hate her for what she doesn’t question. For the way she fits.”

Anastasia moved to the table and sat, folding her hands before her. The snow outside continued, patient and steady. It covered the paths without sound, blurred the trees, softened the world until it looked gentle. But inside, the silence held weight.

She had once been told—by a visiting aunt, long gone now—that marriage was not about love, but order. A woman’s life was a window, and marriage the frame that gave it shape. Without it, she would drift, seen only through the glass, not as part of the structure.

“I understood even then,” Anastasia thought, “that love was a decoration added after the fact. If it arrived at all.”

Among the girls she grew up with, marriage was spoken of in hushed tones and measured glances, like the weather—something expected, sometimes feared, but always coming. They weighed each man’s income, his land, his habits, his mood. They whispered about dowries, about reputations, about family names. A few spoke of feelings, of longings—but always carefully, always after the other questions had been asked.

“It was not a union,” she thought. “It was a bargain. I’ll give you my youth, my obedience, my womb. You’ll give me your name, your house, your bread.”

And beneath that exchange, another, unspoken layer: her usefulness, her ability to soothe, to be pleasant, to remain quiet when anger rose. She had watched her cousins navigate this with practiced smiles. They adjusted themselves like garments to the fit of each man’s expectations.

“I never learned how to be wanted like that,” she thought. “I never learned how to mold myself without cracking.”

The few suitors that had visited—briefly, awkwardly—had looked at her with mild interest and then polite withdrawal. She could feel them measuring her in silence: too pale, too thin, too quiet, too strange. The rumors of her health, her fragility, the long days she spent reading and walking alone—none of it made her a wise investment.

And she had not tried to convince them otherwise.

“I refused to become a product,” she thought. “And so they moved on, to girls who smiled more easily and asked fewer questions.”

She could not decide whether it had been pride or fear that had shaped her refusal. Perhaps both. Perhaps they were the same.

The window panes rattled softly in the wind. She looked out at the growing snow, the world folding itself into whiteness.

“Marriage was never a door,” she thought. “Only a corridor leading to another kind of silence.”

She remembered the drawing room in spring, when visitors came and chairs were rearranged just so, and flowers placed carefully where they might be noticed but not admired too much. The samovar hissed, the porcelain clinked, and the young men sat stiff in their coats while the girls lowered their eyes at the right moments and offered remarks rehearsed that morning with their mothers. The entire scene choreographed like a play, repeated with variations week after week.

Anastasia had sat through these gatherings at the edge of the room, a book in her lap she did not read. She watched the way the girls touched their teacups, the exact angle of the wrist, the

flick of the eyes to make a glance appear accidental. The way they leaned forward just enough to suggest interest, never enough to seem forward. The way they laughed—too softly, too briefly, like a bell muffled under cloth.

"It was a language I never learned," Anastasia thought. "All gesture. All shadow. Nothing said plainly, and everything meant."

The men played their part too—asking after embroidery as if it mattered, complimenting shawls their sisters would never wear, offering opinions on poets they had never read. They commented on weather, on horses, on the music played by girls who could barely press the keys without trembling.

It was not deceit, she realized, but an agreement. Each side pretended, together, and whoever pretended most convincingly was rewarded. She had seen the best actresses married by nineteen.

"There was no honesty in it," she thought. "But there was safety. And safety is enough, for some."

She had tried once to participate—at seventeen, in a blue dress with sleeves that pinched her arms. She had offered her opinion too plainly, spoken of a novel too passionately, forgotten to smile when spoken to. The young man—his name lost to her now—had blinked at her as though she had spoken in the wrong tongue. He had excused himself after the third cup of tea. He never returned.

The next morning, her mother had smoothed her hair with slow fingers and said, "Don't speak so much, Nastya. It confuses them."

From that point on, she observed rather than joined. She learned to read the current of a conversation without stepping into it. She could tell which glances would become engagements and which would fade. She saw the smiles that were forced, the silences that were hopeful, the touch of a hand on a sleeve that meant far more than anything said aloud.

"It was all absurd," she thought. "And yet it worked. Not because it was true—but because everyone agreed to believe it long enough for lives to be joined."

She looked out the window again. The snow had covered the orchard now, the trees like statues half-buried. A magpie landed on the fence, shook the flakes from its feathers, and flew off again—alone, with no ceremony.

It came back to her sometimes when the house was most still, like a word spoken softly into a church long after the congregation had gone. Not a memory that held warmth, but one that lingered because it had so little to cling to. Just a shape, a gesture, the faint echo of what might have become something and then did not.

He had been a visitor—an acquaintance of her uncle, perhaps, or a relative of someone passing through the district. She never knew quite how he came to the house. He stayed two days, perhaps three, sleeping in the room above the vestibule. His name was Ivan or Mikhail

or something equally common, and he was not remarkable except for being young and not entirely unpleasant to look at. She was nineteen, thin as a reed, her health passable that season, her nerves quiet.

They had been left alone in the garden once, for no more than a few minutes. Her mother had gone inside to fetch embroidery. Her father had dozed off in the sun. He had asked her if she read novels, and she had said yes, more than she should. He smiled politely, the way one does when unsure if something was meant as a joke.

There was a pause. Then he had taken her hand—not quickly, not with passion, just taken it as if to see how it felt. His palm was warm and dry, and her fingers remained limp within it. She had not withdrawn, but neither had she leaned into the moment.

“What happened next?” she thought now, frowning faintly. “Nothing. That was all.”

They had stood like that for a breath or two. Then her mother returned and the hand was released. The conversation shifted to something about the weather, or the planting season, or whether there would be guests for supper. She never saw him again. No letter followed. No mention of interest. Her mother had made no comment, and she had offered none.

And yet it stayed with her, not as regret, but as a kind of proof that nothing more had ever come.

“It was supposed to begin like that,” she thought. “A touch, a glance, a name whispered in confidence. But all I felt was the strangeness of being held.”

There had been no stirring in her chest, no thrill, no sense of being drawn into the mystery other girls spoke of in half-lowered voices. Only awareness—his skin, her silence, the brittle sound of wind in the hedge behind them. It might have been the first touch of her life, and yet it left nothing. Not even sorrow.

“I am not sure if it was me, or him, or the world,” she thought. “But something failed to ignite.”

She stood now at the window, her reflection faint against the glass. Snow softened the edges of everything, even memory. Behind her, the fire cracked. In her chest, a silence too old to break.

The glass chilled beneath her fingertips as she leaned forward, watching the snow gather in soft folds across the windowsill. Outside, the orchard had nearly vanished—tree trunks lost to the blur of white, paths erased, corners rounded. There was a kind of mercy in how the snow covered everything equally, making no distinction between the valued and the forgotten.

But mercy was not the same as kindness.

Anastasia stood there, unmoving, and felt it again—that low, shapeless ache, not sharp, not new, but steady. The shame. Not the shame of failure, nor scandal, nor sin, but the quieter shame of simply not being chosen.

“It is a strange wound,” she thought, “to be passed over gently. To be left untouched, not because you are hated, but because you are invisible.”

No dramatic heartbreak. No ruined engagement. No tear-stained letters or dramatic scenes by the gate. Only absence. Only the long silence that followed every season when girls disappeared from the circle of friendship—married off, matched, claimed—and she remained. Standing at the edge with a pleasant smile, saying kind things, attending the weddings, watching the couples dance. Always watching. Never called forward.

She had grown used to being the one to whom no offer came. But the world around her had not grown used to her presence in that place. Her aunts, her cousins, even the servants—they had all, in time, looked at her with that same tilt of the head, that slight narrowing of the eyes. Concern, poorly hidden. Kindness, poorly veiled.

“I fear their compassion more than their cruelty,” she thought. “Let them laugh, let them mock, but do not feel sorry for me.”

For what would be worse than not being chosen? To be chosen out of pity. To be taken in like a lost pet, out of mercy or obligation, some man deciding to settle for her in a moment of softness or boredom. She would rather remain untouched forever than be held with condescension.

“A pity marriage,” she thought bitterly. “A man who smiles too kindly, who praises my mind and forgets my face. Who asks for nothing but gives nothing in return.”

She imagined the weight of such a bond—a life spent performing gratitude for something she never desired. A husband who thought himself noble for loving her. A life reduced to a quiet humiliation, smiling at supper while the neighbors whispered about how fortunate she had been, how charitable he had been, how strange she still remained.

“No,” she thought, the word cold and certain. “Better the silence. Better the snow.”

She turned from the window. The fire in the stove had burned down low again. She reached for the iron poker and stirred the coals until they caught. A small flame flickered into being.

She warmed her hands, and said nothing more.

Letters from a Cousin

The letter arrived folded with care, the paper crisp, pale blue, smelling faintly of lavender and carriage smoke. It bore her name in delicate handwriting, the kind that sloped gently and politely, shaped by years of instruction and correspondence. Her cousin Elizaveta had always written that way—graceful, light, like speech meant to charm without consequence.

Anastasia sat by the window with the letter in her lap. She turned it once in her hands before opening it, as if the envelope itself might reveal some secret before the words had their say. Then, slowly, she unfolded it and began to read.

The letter was full of happenings. A new house on the Fontanka Canal. Two children now, both girls, with hair "the color of summer wheat." Elizaveta's husband had been given a minor post in the ministry, and they had attended a musicale hosted by a baroness whose name Anastasia no longer recognized. There had been dancing. There had been roses.

Anastasia's eyes drifted across the ink, not pausing long on any one sentence. The words slipped into her like cold air beneath a door. They described a life that sounded soft, sunlit, full of laughter and motion—but somehow distant, unreal, like a play she had once seen and barely remembered.

At the end, her cousin wrote: *We all think of you often, dearest Nastya. Mama sends her fondest greetings. Perhaps you will visit us one day? Do write when you can. It would be such a delight to hear from you.*

Anastasia folded the letter carefully, then held it between her hands as if it were something fragile and old. Her mouth formed no smile. Her face remained unchanged.

"They do not think of me," she thought. "They remember to mention me. There is a difference."

The letter had not asked after her health. It had not inquired about her days, her solitude, her thoughts. It had said nothing of the orchard, the snow, the sound of the house settling at night. It was a gesture, not a bridge—a performance of connection, not the thing itself.

"She writes because I am still a name in the family book," Anastasia thought. "A name without a footnote. A branch that bears no fruit."

There had been a time when she and Elizaveta wrote each other regularly, as girls. Their letters had been full of secrets, imagined stories, vows of eternal closeness. But time, and distance, and difference had thinned that bond until it became what it now was—duty wrapped in politeness.

She placed the letter on the table and looked out into the garden. The snow had deepened since morning. A sparrow pecked at the edge of the steps, its feathers puffed against the cold.

"They send their greetings," she thought. "And I return nothing. Because there is nothing here to return."

She leaned back in the chair, eyes still resting on the pale edge of the letter, though her thoughts had already moved beyond it. The mention of Petersburg stirred something faint and distant within her—a thread not yet snapped, but stretched thin by years of silence.

She had never been to the city. It had always remained a place in stories, in paintings, in overheard conversations. She could picture it—stone bridges over dark canals, women in

velvet cloaks gliding across polished floors, the glow of gas lamps reflected in carriage windows. Music spilling from open doors, voices rising in salons, the rustle of silk and paper, of movement and life. All of it vivid, and all of it imagined.

“Cities,” she thought, “are for those who expect to be seen.”

And she had never expected that. Her world had been orchards and kitchen smoke, the slow rhythm of bells from the village, the same hallway passed a thousand times. She had read of cities, yes—characters who wandered down crowded streets, who stepped into cafés and met strangers who would change their fates. But those were other lives, other women. Women who knew how to enter a room without apology, who knew how to dance not only in parlors, but in words.

She imagined herself in such a place once, long ago. Dressed simply, walking unnoticed through a wide square in early evening, the sound of hooves on wet stones, the fog rising from the river. No one would stop her. No one would recognize her. And yet she would belong simply by being there—by moving among the breathing world.

But even in that fantasy, she was alone. Always alone. Watching.

“I would not know how to speak to those people,” she thought. “Their voices are faster. Their smiles sharper. Their wants clearer.”

The city had always seemed a world of hunger—social, political, romantic. A place where everything moved forward with speed and heat. She was not made for such air. The stillness in her was too deep, her pace too slow. Her silence would be mistaken for dullness, her absence for weakness.

And yet she longed for it. Not the life itself, but the feeling of possibility that such a place held—the endless unfolding of things. A knock at the door, a letter slipped into a book, a glance across a crowded room. These things happened in cities. Here, only the seasons changed.

“The city belongs to those who expect interruption,” she thought. “I have only ever expected continuation.”

She turned her eyes back to the letter. The ink was neat, precise, confident. A city’s handwriting. A life written in margins she had never been invited to enter.

She rose slowly and placed the letter in the drawer, not out of anger, but to put it away where it could no longer offer something she would never touch.

She stood at the window again, her arms crossed loosely over her chest, watching as the wind swept the snow into low, restless swirls across the path. A dog barked far off, a single sound in the white stillness. Somewhere within the house, a door creaked, then closed. The sounds were ordinary, passing, unmarked. Much like herself.

“How do they see me?” she wondered. “Do they?”

Not just her parents, who moved past her like furniture worn by habit, nor the maid, who addressed her with quiet respect but without curiosity. She thought of the villagers—those she passed occasionally on her way to the apothecary, or the chapel, or the post. They greeted her with politeness. A nod. A "Barishnya." But no one asked her name anymore. No one asked anything at all.

She had become, she suspected, a sort of figure. Not a woman, exactly, but a presence. Someone who passed silently, whose hands were always gloved, whose voice was rarely heard, whose eyes seemed always focused on something just behind the moment.

"Perhaps they think I am mad," she thought. "Or touched by God. Or sorrow. Or some quiet thing they cannot name."

She did not mind the silence of others. It matched her own. But it disturbed her to think she might have slipped into their minds not as herself, but as an outline—something defined only by absence. Like the house's empty third room, which no one entered but all remembered was there.

Even her cousin, in that letter, had spoken of her with a softness that felt like gauze laid over a wound that no one wanted to see. *Dearest Nastya.* As if she were a fading portrait on a hallway wall.

"There was a time," she thought, "when I wished to be seen with longing. Then, at least, the gaze would be sharp, heavy. Now I wonder if I am seen at all."

She remembered once catching sight of herself reflected in a shop window in town—her posture hunched slightly, her coat ill-fitted, her expression still. She had startled at her own image, as one does when seeing a stranger who looks briefly familiar.

"I do not even appear to myself," she thought. "How could I expect others to see me?"

She pressed her hand against the glass. Her reflection blurred with the snow. Only the faint shape of her mouth remained, and even that, only for a moment.

The windowpane cooled her fingertips until the sensation faded into numbness, and still she did not move. The world beyond the glass was still—white paths buried, trees still as carved pillars, sky lowering in that colorless tone that made the hours indistinguishable. In this quiet, her thoughts slipped free again, unbidden and without urgency, like leaves drifting down a river.

She thought of the village women. The way they stood in the marketplace with baskets on their hips and scarves tight around their heads, their voices pitched just loud enough to be heard without appearing eager. They smiled at one another. They spoke of ailments, neighbors, upcoming feasts, the price of bread. They greeted the priest with warmth. They scolded their children, joked with their husbands. All of it seamless.

“They believe in the shape of their lives,” Anastasia thought. “They believe in waking, in doing, in sleeping. In repetition. In planning the next day as if it will certainly come and bring something worth reaching for.”

It was not stupidity. It was not blindness. It was a kind of performance, yes—but a sincere one. The way people acted love in courtship and then, over time, began to feel it. The way they observed holidays, birthdays, deaths, and through ritual found meaning where perhaps there had been none. They prepared meals not only to eat, but to live within a rhythm that gave their existence a frame.

She remembered how Masha had smiled when she spoke of Pavel. Not foolishly. Not childishly. But with that clean simplicity of someone who had accepted the terms of life and met them without resistance.

“Even the sorrow of such people fits neatly,” Anastasia thought. “They cry when someone dies. They wear black for a time. Then they laugh again. They know when to mourn and when to rejoice.”

But what of her? Her joys were thin, scattered. Her grief had no boundaries. She felt it come and go without invitation, unanchored to any one event. She did not know when to smile, unless someone else smiled first. She had never learned to desire properly—to want something and reach for it. Her longings folded in on themselves like a shirt left damp too long in a drawer, crumpled and sour.

“I perform the outline,” she thought. “I wake, I dress, I walk, I eat. But no one sees me act it, and I feel no applause.”

Normality was not a state. It was a script, passed from hand to hand, and she had never learned the lines. Others spoke fluently of the future, of children not yet born, of houses not yet built. She could barely speak of the next hour.

She drew her hand back from the glass. The print of her fingers remained, fogged against the window for a moment, then vanished.

While the pie baked, its scent rising softly into the corners of the kitchen, Anastasia stepped into the sitting room and retrieved the old paint box from beneath the shelf. It had belonged to her father once, in his younger years, before his eyes began to fail him. Most of the colors had dried in their tins, but a few still yielded pigment when coaxed with water. She found a small scrap of paper—thick, yellowing at the edges—and sat by the window where the light fell cleanest.

She painted without thought. A single branch, bare and bowed, with three birds perched upon it—small, dark shapes with no detail. Below, a faint sweep of snow. No faces. No sky. Only form and quiet. When it was done, she held it in her hand, unsure if it was beautiful or nothing at all. She placed it on the table without ceremony and returned to the kitchen.

The pie was finished. She took it out, let it cool near the window, where the breeze pushed in under the cracked frame. The scent of apples and spice settled around her like an old shawl. She made tea, not because she desired it, but because the act was part of something steady, something she could complete. She drank slowly, watching steam curl upward and vanish into the quiet air.

Later, she put on her shawl and stepped outside. The snow had begun to melt where the sun touched the ground, revealing patches of old grass and dark earth. The trees stood motionless, their branches thin and clean. A woodpecker knocked at the far end of the orchard, hidden behind the trunks, and a few starlings gathered on the fence, shifting their feet as if unsure whether to remain or flee. She breathed in deeply—the air cold and sharp, full of nothing but itself.

"I am still here," she thought, not in pride or sadness. Only acknowledgment.

When she returned inside, the house greeted her with its usual hush. She removed her shawl, set the teacup in the basin, and went to the drawer. The letter lay where she had left it, pale blue, folded precisely. She held it for a moment, not reading it again. There was no need. The words had already settled inside her, had already done what they would do.

She moved to the stove, lifted the iron lid, and placed the letter gently on the red coals. It curled quickly, edges blackening, ink disappearing into smoke. No words cried out. No heat rose in her chest. Only the faint scent of lavender burned to ash.

She closed the lid.

In the silence that followed, nothing changed. And yet the room felt slightly larger. Or perhaps emptier. She stood a moment longer, then turned and walked back to the window. The snow was melting still. The birds remained.

A Fever

It began with a dull ache behind her eyes, the kind that flickered and withdrew like a moth testing the flame. By evening, her limbs had grown heavy, her skin too warm beneath the blankets, and her breath came in shallow, uneven pulls. The walls of her room seemed to stretch and then draw close again, like the chest of something breathing quietly in the dark.

She lay still. The fire snapped softly. The coals burned low, but she did not rise to tend them. The weight of her own body had become unfamiliar—like a coat worn too long, no longer fitting at the shoulders. Even her hair on the pillow felt strange, pressing against her neck like damp thread.

Each movement brought a throb. Her throat ached, not sharp but dry and endless, as if she had been speaking all night in a language she did not know. Her mouth tasted of iron and dust.

“I am not dying,” she thought. “I am simply sinking.”

She closed her eyes, and within the darkness her thoughts drifted untethered, strange and slow. She dreamed of a hallway without doors, of voices that echoed but spoke no words. She saw a garden covered in ash, where girls in veils danced without music. She saw herself walking into a river, the water rising past her knees, her waist, her chest—cold at first, then warm, then nothing at all.

Between dreams came moments of awareness. A glass of water at her bedside. Footsteps creaking the boards. Her mother’s voice, faint through the door, asking if she’d eaten. She had not. She could not. Food was a concept belonging to another world.

But more than the pain, more than the burning skin or the thick weight in her lungs, was the exhaustion—not only of body, but of soul. As though something long stretched thin inside her had finally torn.

“I am tired,” she thought. “Not from fever. From living.”

The walls pulsed softly in the candlelight. Shadows moved. Her fingers curled and uncurled beneath the blankets, searching for comfort and finding only the edge of the mattress. She no longer knew if it was night or day. The distinction had lost meaning.

She wanted no visitors. She desired no care. Not out of pride, but because there was nothing to give back. Her body was a vessel emptied without ceremony. What remained was not fear, nor even grief—only a weariness that ran to the bone.

“If I wake,” she thought, “I will still be here. If I do not, I will be nowhere. And both seem bearable.”

The fever climbed. The room darkened. And she let it take her.

The fever rose and folded the world into wavering shapes. The ceiling blurred, the corners of the room softened, and the thin light from the candle stretched itself into ribbons that trembled when she breathed. Sweat gathered at her temples. Her nightdress clung to her like another skin.

She drifted toward sleep but did not fall into it. Instead, a warmth—foreign, impossible—moved across her shoulders. Not the blanket. Not the heat of illness. Something else. A hand, or the memory of one. Fingers pressing gently at the base of her neck, sliding upward, brushing her hair away as though with tenderness. She did not pull away. She could not. The touch felt real enough to anchor her to the mattress.

For a moment, she imagined someone sitting beside her, close enough that the bed dipped under his weight. A breath near her ear. A quiet reassurance in a voice without words. The ghost of a kiss on her cheek—soft, deliberate, devastating in its gentleness. Another on her throat. Then her mouth. Nothing urgent. Nothing demanded. Just presence.

Her breath hitched. Her fingers curled weakly in the sheets. Heat gathered in her chest—something fierce, something hungry, something she had no language for. The room spun with the sharp sweetness of it.

Then the warmth dissolved.

The air returned cold. The bed rose to stillness. Her skin burned where the imagined lips had touched, as though shame itself had hands.

“What am I doing?” she thought, her pulse trembling beneath her ribs. “What have I become to long for something that was never meant for me?”

The fever pressed harder. Her breath grew shallow. She tried to roll onto her side, away from the phantom sensation lingering along her jaw, but the effort was too great. Her limbs disobeyed her. A flush rose to her cheeks, not from the heat, but from her own awareness.

“It was only the illness,” she told herself. “Only the fever playing tricks.”

But the shame sat heavily beside her, heavier than the imagined visitor. Shame that she had allowed even a dream to touch her. Shame that her body—ignored for so long—had responded like a starving creature offered crumbs.

She pressed her forearm to her eyes, hiding from the room, from herself, from the ghost of her own desire.

The hallucination faded. Only the fever remained.

She awoke to the faint creak of the door opening. Light spilled in from the hallway—a grey, reluctant light—and the sound of cautious steps followed, slow and measured. Her eyes remained half-closed, lids too heavy to lift fully. Through the narrow slit of sight, she saw the shape of her mother standing at the foot of the bed.

There was no rush to her movements. No hushed cries of concern, no warm hands at the brow. Only a calm, practiced stillness. She set a folded cloth on the bedside table, adjusted the blanket without comment, and placed a small bowl of broth near the edge, though Anastasia made no move toward it.

“I thought you might eat something,” her mother said, voice low and even, as if speaking into a church pew rather than to a daughter.

Anastasia didn’t answer. Her throat felt thick with sleep, her mouth sour with fever. Her eyes fluttered shut again.

She felt her mother’s hand—cool, dry—rest briefly on her forehead, then lift. There was no linger to it, no stroke of affection. Only assessment. Her mother sighed softly, as if confirming the illness was still there, as if she had known it would be.

“This will pass,” she murmured. “Or it won’t.”

The words were not cruel. They were simply spoken with the same tone used to discuss crops, or the weather, or the mending that needed doing before winter. Her mother had never been harsh, only remote. Her love had always come in the shape of duties fulfilled: folded linens, warm soup, slippers placed by the stove. Not embraces. Not questions. Not warmth that lingered.

As a child, Anastasia had once fallen on the stones outside the orchard, her knees scraped raw. Her mother had cleaned the wounds with vinegar, bandaged them tightly, and said, "There. You'll walk fine tomorrow." No kiss to the brow, no murmured comfort. Only the reassurance that pain was to be endured, and then dismissed.

And now, as she lay in the ache of fever, that same reassurance returned.

"You'll sweat it out," her mother said quietly, gathering the soiled linens from the chair. "Or not."

There was no anger in her tone. No resentment. Just the grim continuity of her character. She had lived long enough to see worse and survived it by not bending too far.

Anastasia watched her leave the room, the door closing softly behind her.

"She does care," she thought. "But in the way one cares for a pot not to crack in the frost."

Not love, as she had once imagined it. But something colder. Enduring. Like the house itself. Still standing. Still holding. But never warm.

The fever dimmed for a moment, enough for the edges of the room to steady. She lay on her back, eyes half-open, watching the faint shimmer of candlelight on the ceiling. The thought rose quietly, without fright, without sting—just a slow drift from the depth of her tired mind.

Her funeral.

Not as tragedy, not as spectacle—only as a small event, the kind that slipped into a village's routine like weather changing.

She pictured the church first. Cold stone. The air scented with beeswax and damp wood. A handful of candles lit out of habit rather than grief. Her coffin plain, perhaps pine, perhaps whatever wood was left in the storeroom. A white cloth draped over it, smoothed by Masha's careful hands.

"Who would come?" she wondered, her breath stirring faintly against the pillow. "Who has ever truly come for me?"

Her parents, of course. Her mother upright, her expression composed, lips pressed thin—not out of sorrow, but endurance. Her father beside her, confused, perhaps not fully understanding what had happened, asking someone quietly whether the service had begun. He might forget, halfway home, which child had died.

The villagers would attend because it was proper. Because a daughter of the house deserved the appearance of respect. They would stand in their worn coats, shuffle their feet, murmur to one another about the cold, about the harvest, about the distance from their homes. A few would cross themselves with genuine solemnity, though not for her—for the act itself.

The priest would recite the prayers evenly, without haste. His voice would echo gently against the walls, filling the silence she had carried her whole life. He had never spoken to her beyond greetings, never asked what she thought, never wondered who she was beneath her quiet. He would guide her soul into the next world with the same calm he used for children and old men.

Perhaps her cousin Elizaveta would send a letter of condolence, folded neatly, full of phrases like “so regrettable” and “may the angels keep her.” The kind of letter that arrives too late to matter, written more for form than for memory.

“They will speak kindly,” Anastasia thought. “Kindly, and emptily. As one speaks of a neighbor’s distant relative.”

She imagined the words; she had heard them before at other funerals.

“She was a gentle girl.” “A quiet soul.” “The poor thing.” “At least she’s at peace.”

Nothing true, nothing false—just the comfortable phrases people used when they knew very little of the life extinguished before them.

Outside the church, after the burial, the villagers would linger only long enough to nod politely, then turn toward their homes. Her parents would return to the house, the chairs still in their places, the kettle still needing boiling, the silence unchanged.

“That would be it,” she thought. “A brief ceremony. A short walk. A name spoken once or twice, then folded away.”

No wailing. No remembrance. No great emptiness left behind.

Only a thinning of air. A door no longer opened. A chair no longer occupied.

Her eyes closed again. The fever pulsed at her temples.

“And perhaps,” she thought, “that would be enough.”

By the third morning, the fever loosened its grip. It did not vanish—it simply withdrew, like a tide pulling back from the shore, leaving her weak and hollow on the wet sand it had exposed. She woke to the cool light of dawn pressing through the curtains, pale as skimmed milk. Her breath no longer rasped. Her hands no longer trembled. But her body felt foreign, as if borrowed from someone else and returned slightly damaged.

She pushed herself upright with slow, deliberate care. The pillow bore the marks of days spent turning feverishly from one side to the other. The sheets were tangled around her legs,

damp with sweat that had already cooled. She could smell the faint trace of sickness on her skin, but she lacked the strength to rise and wash.

“I am better,” she thought. “Or something near it.”

She waited for relief to come. For gratitude. For even a thin thread of renewed longing for the world beyond her room. None arrived. Her chest remained an empty chamber—soundless, hollow, undisturbed. It was not disappointment, either. Just an absence, a flatness like untouched earth after frost.

She turned her head toward the window. The world beyond the glass was white and unmoving. Frost coated every branch of the orchard trees, each twig encased in a thin sheath of ice that caught the faint morning light and held it, dimly. The garden looked like a place carved rather than grown, silent and rigid, as though time itself had stopped during the night.

The sight stirred nothing in her. No sorrow. No joy. No dread. Only recognition.

“Yes,” she thought quietly. “This is fitting.”

Her mother tapped once at the door, then entered without waiting. A tray was set on the small table—broth, cooled bread, weak tea. Her mother glanced at her, nodded without expression.

“You’re improving,” she said, as if commenting on the weather. “You should try to eat.”

Anastasia nodded. Not out of agreement, but because it was the easiest response.

Her mother left.

The door closed softly.

Anastasia reached for the cup of tea. Her fingers wrapped around it without purpose, without expectation. She sipped. It tasted of nothing.

Outside, a single branch cracked beneath the weight of ice and fell soundlessly into the snow.

The Mirror

The hallway was narrow, half-lit by a window at its end, the air chilled with a stillness that seemed to gather in corners and cling to the walls. The mirror hung where it always had, beside the coat rack with its one unused hook, across from the door that led to the unused parlor. It was tall, framed in dark wood with delicate carvings worn smooth by years of passing fingers. Anastasia had not looked into it—truly looked—for a long time.

She stood before it now, wrapped in her shawl, her feet bare against the creaking floor. A draft moved along the baseboards, and she felt it rise up the hem of her dress, like a whisper reminding her to leave. But she did not.

The mirror returned her gaze quietly. The glass was a little fogged at the edges, warped by age, but it did not lie.

Her face stared back—not with shock, not even sadness, but with recognition. Her skin was paler than she remembered. There was a sharpness to the cheeks now, a subtle hollow beneath the eyes. Not illness—no longer fever—but the fine erosion of time. Her mouth, once fuller, now rested in its own slight frown, even when she felt nothing at all. And her eyes—those remained the same. That unsettled her more than anything.

"I thought I had changed," she thought. "But here I am. Still watching."

There was youth in her still, but only the ghost of it. It lingered in the curve of her jaw, in the light at the edge of her hair, but the softness had gone. What remained was quiet, lean, unfinished. As though she had never been fully made into something else.

She leaned closer. There were faint lines forming at her brow. A freckle beneath her chin she had forgotten. Her hair, darker than the girls in the novels, showed one thread of silver near the temple. She reached up and touched it, not with alarm but with a strange curiosity.

"This is the face they saw," she thought. "When they turned away. When they said nothing. When they said too much."

The mirror gave no answer. Only the shape of her life, pressed flat into reflection.

She stepped back, slowly. Her figure shrank in the glass, until it was no more than a dark silhouette among shadows. Still there. Still whole. But no longer expecting to be different.

Then she turned, and the mirror returned to its silence.

As she walked slowly from the hallway, her arms folded close around her shawl, Anastasia thought of beauty—not as a gift, nor a blessing, but as something demanded, something extracted. Not by nature, but by people. By glances. By silence. By the weight of unspoken comparisons that pressed against her all her life.

Beauty was never something she believed she possessed. It had always been spoken of around her, as if she were the room beside the one being admired.

"She has lovely eyes," they said of other girls. "Such hair." "A graceful figure." "She'll have suitors soon enough."

The words never reached her.

"I was never called beautiful," she thought, "but I was expected to become it anyway."

Because to be a woman—of a certain age, in a certain place—was to owe beauty. It was currency. It was entry. It was proof of belonging. And when it did not arrive naturally, one was expected to craft it, to coax it out with ribbons and blush and smiles that curved at the right places, never too high or too low. It was not enough to exist. One had to be pleasing. To be chosen, one had to offer something in return.

And when she did not offer it—when her face remained solemn, her dress unadorned, her posture still—they did not call her lacking. They called her quiet. They called her delicate. They called her strange. Words used to spare themselves the discomfort of saying what was truly thought.

“They called me thoughtful,” she remembered, “as if it were a flaw they could forgive.”

She had seen beauty weaponized—girls who wielded it like a blade, who understood its shape and moved through rooms as if the very air opened for them. She did not resent them. She studied them with the quiet ache of someone reading a text in a language just beyond her grasp.

But beauty, as she now understood it, was not about being seen. It was about being allowed. It was the thing that made your silence acceptable, your faults forgivable, your life worth investing in.

And she had not been allowed. Not in that way.

“I was not ugly,” she thought. “I was simply unfinished. And they grew tired of waiting.”

The frost outside glittered on the branches. A thin ray of sunlight moved slowly along the wall, touching nothing and changing nothing.

She stood for a long while, letting that light warm her hands without warming her heart.

It came to her without warning—his name long buried, perhaps Aleksandr, or Yuri, or something just as common and soft at the edges. A boy from before everything quieted. Before her body grew strange to her, before her voice thinned, before the world became a hallway of passing shadows.

He had been the son of a visiting magistrate, or perhaps a distant cousin of one of the estate managers. He stayed only a short while, one summer, when the orchard was thick with green and the sky hung low and heavy with storms. They had been children, nearly—but not quite. At that age when the eyes begin to look differently, but the heart has not yet caught up.

She remembered standing beside him once, in the stables, both watching the same mare foal for the first time. The smell of hay, the nervous shuffle of hooves, the heat of animals close together. They had spoken little—perhaps not at all. But she remembered his hands, how he folded them behind his back, how his mouth twitched into a smile not meant for anyone.

And her own body, then, had stirred. Not with desire as she later came to understand it. No. Something simpler. More frightening. The sudden awareness that she existed not just in thought, but in space. That she might be seen.

“I did not have the words,” she thought. “I only knew something had shifted.”

Later, she had dreamt of him. Not of touches or kisses—such things were still too far, too foreign. But of presence. He walked beside her in a field. He turned to her and said something

she could never remember upon waking. And in the dream, she felt calm. Not joyous, not thrilled. Just a quiet certainty that someone else was near.

That was all. The summer passed. He left. No letters came. No promises had been made. It was not a romance. It was not a wound. It was simply a moment she had carried forward, unmarked but not forgotten.

“I don’t think I loved him,” she thought. “I think I loved that I was possible, in his eyes.”

No one else had ever looked at her like that again—not with hunger, not with longing, not even with curiosity. And perhaps it had only been her imagination. Perhaps he had looked past her, not at her. Perhaps he had not even remembered her name.

Still, the memory remained. Not as hope. Not even as pain. But as evidence. Once, someone had stood beside her and not turned away. And she had felt it.

For that, she had no word. And still didn’t.

The light faded early that afternoon. The sky dimmed not with storm, but with that gentle, gray indifference that came before snowfall. Anastasia sat in the parlor alone, the pie from days ago untouched on the sideboard, the fire reduced to coals that glowed without effort. Her hands rested in her lap, still. Her eyes watched the frost climb the window in slow veins of ice.

She did not speak aloud—there was no one to hear—but her thoughts gathered thick and pressing, like smoke unable to rise.

“What if I was made only to witness?”

The question did not surprise her. It had lived at the edge of her mind for years, now bold enough to step into the center. It came without accusation, without rage—only a sort of aching inquiry.

Others were touched. Their hands held, their backs pressed to another’s chest in the comfort of night, their mouths found by someone else's with certainty or hunger or trembling need. Others were named aloud—*my dear, my wife, my daughter, my love.* Others were gathered into arms in mourning, in joy, in the everyday passing of time.

But she—she had passed through the years without being chosen, without being drawn close. Her skin remembered no press of lips, no hand threading through her hair, no head resting lightly against her shoulder.

“Was it withheld?” she wondered. “Was it God, deciding in some high and distant place that my portion would be stillness?”

She had prayed, as a girl. Often, and with sincerity. She had not asked for much. Not beauty. Not wealth. Only that she might be seen. That her voice might echo back from somewhere, proving she was not alone in the great hall of this world.

No answer had come. Or if it had, it had been given in silence. In the form of a life that was still, unshaken, untouched.

“Perhaps I was made only to watch,” she thought. “To observe the softness in others, the touch passed from hand to hand, the warmth like sunlight they share without thinking.”

She looked out at the garden. A pair of birds stood at the well, pecking at the rim, their wings close together, their movements echoing each other. She watched them until they flew off, leaving the stone bare again.

“If this is what was chosen for me,” she thought, “then let me witness it fully. Let me see everything, if I may not be held.”

Her hands remained folded. Her face calm.

There were no tears. Only stillness. Only breath.

Winter Silence

The snow had not ceased for three days. It came without wind, without weight, falling straight and soft, blanketing the earth in endless repetition. The orchard was buried now, each tree wrapped in white robes, the paths vanished, the sky a steady gray that offered no beginning and no end. The village beyond the hill lay hushed—roofs bowed, chimneys smoking quietly, dogs unseen, bells muffled.

Inside the house, time thickened.

Anastasia sat by the stove, shawl drawn tight, her fingers folded around a cup that had long since gone cold. The tea was forgotten. Her thoughts had wandered to the shape of time itself—how it stretched in youth, vast and full of peaks and bends, and how now, in her stillness, it had flattened into something nearly motionless. Days no longer began; they merely continued.

“I cannot remember yesterday,” she thought. “And I do not wait for tomorrow.”

Each day resembled the last, not by disaster or design, but by a slow dimming of distinction. The same chair. The same fire. The same footfall of her mother passing down the hall, her father coughing in the other room. The same quiet meals, the same book left unread on the table, the same ritual of rising, washing, sitting, retiring. Time did not pass—it gathered, like dust in corners.

She had not marked her last birthday. It had arrived silently, like all things now. The year before had gone unmarked as well. There was a small drawer in her room that held a ribbon from her girlhood, still bright, and a thimble, and a pressed violet between pages—tokens from a life that once measured time in moments.

Now, even her own face in the mirror failed to shock her. The changes came too slowly, too subtly. The creases near her mouth, the faint hollows at her temples, the tiredness that lingered in her shoulders even after sleep.

She reached for the matchbox, lit the lamp, and watched its glow push softly against the gray. There was no difference between the hours now. Morning and evening had ceased to carry meaning.

“This is how aging truly begins,” she thought. “Not in pain. Not in weakness. But in repetition.”

Beyond the walls, the snow continued. The sound of it was no sound at all—only a deepening hush. The world wrapped itself tighter and tighter in stillness. And she remained, untouched, uncalled, unmarked, watching it all from within.

She leaned back in the worn chair, the lamp casting a pale halo across the floor, and let her thoughts drift backward—not with longing, but with the distant patience one gives to a story already known. She thought of herself at sixteen, seated on the back step of the house, sketching the garden in a small leather-bound notebook. Her dress was too thin for the season; her knees had been cold. But she had not noticed. She had believed then that each moment was part of something.

Not merely existence, but *purpose*—a thread woven through every hour, connecting days like beads on a string. Every ache, every joy, every silence held weight, waiting to be revealed. She had woken each morning with the sense that something was *beginning.*

She remembered the books she read—novels full of difficult decisions, sweeping romances, revelations. Girls who stood on cliffs and changed the course of their lives with a glance, a word, a kiss. She had read them with rapt attention, not foolishly, but faithfully. She had believed that some inner truth would be required of her, and that when the time came, she would rise to meet it.

“There was a time,” she thought, “when I was certain I had been placed in the world for a reason.”

Not grand. Not dramatic. But meaningful. She would help someone. Save something. Be recognized for a gift she had not yet discovered but surely possessed. That belief had given shape to her silence, had made her solitude feel sacred rather than barren.

But the revelation never came. No hidden talent rose to the surface. No secret door opened. The days lengthened and flattened. The people around her grew used to her quiet, then indifferent to it. The letters stopped. The visitors dwindled. The faith faded, not in bitterness, but like light retreating behind a cloud that never lifted.

“I waited for purpose,” she thought. “But perhaps waiting *was* the purpose.”

And now, what remained? A house grown too quiet, a body too still, and a mind that no longer expected to be called upon.

Outside, the snow drifted down in slow, quiet spirals, as if the sky itself were forgetting how to move forward.

She looked at her hands, lying in her lap. Still hands. Capable, once. Capable still, perhaps—but for what, she no longer knew.

The windowpane had begun to frost at the edges again, small star-like formations threading across the glass like pale lace. Anastasia watched them form in silence, breath shallow, blanket gathered over her knees. Somewhere outside, a bell rang—faint and distant—perhaps the smith's midday hour, or the chapel bell marking nothing in particular. That sound, even stripped of meaning, made her envy those who moved by it.

She thought of the women in the village—bent figures in wool shawls, their boots muddied, their hands red from cold water and the scrubbing of stone floors. She had seen them year after year hauling buckets, sweeping paths, tending pigs and children and husbands. Their backs bowed not just from labor, but from belonging to the rhythm of it. Each gesture they made left a mark. Someone noticed if they did not wake. Someone waited for their bread, their mended shirt, their quarrel, their presence.

"They are not free," Anastasia thought, "but they are needed."

She pictured one in particular—Klara, the widow who kept chickens behind the bakery. She had lost two children to fever, and yet every morning she walked to market with eggs in her basket, shawl tied firm beneath her chin. Her hands were rough, her voice loud, her face lined. And yet when she passed, people called her name.

"When I die," Anastasia thought, "no one will miss their supper."

Her own life moved without such interruption. No one waited for her hands. Her absence would not delay a chore. The stove would still be lit. The wood still split. The barn still tended. She had no skill that others required, no role etched into the shape of the day. Even her embroidery—once delicate, once praised—now sat unfinished in a basket by the stove, collecting dust.

"There is dignity in purpose," she thought. "Even in pain. Even in weariness."

She remembered once watching Klara laugh, standing in the snow with her hands on her hips, boots sunk deep in slush, laughing so hard her breath made clouds. There had been no cause for it. Someone had told a story, or perhaps nothing at all. But that laugh had echoed. It had been heard.

Anastasia had smiled faintly then, though no one saw. She had felt that laugh settle in her like warmth from a fire she could not approach.

"They labor," she thought now, "and the world feels them."

She pressed her hand to the frosted glass, watching it melt a clear circle with her warmth. A small print, quickly fading.

“I do not wish to be one of them,” she admitted silently. “Only to matter as they do.”

The fire had grown low, burning in a patient hush. Outside, the snow continued its steady descent, not violent or sudden, but constant, like breath drawn endlessly in. Anastasia sat near the table, an old ink pot before her, untouched. A blank page rested nearby, slightly curled at the corners. She had brought it out without thinking. A habit, perhaps. Or something older.

The quill remained dry.

She stared at the paper, its emptiness pressing outward. A small part of her hand itched to write—just a sentence, a thought, some small shape of herself put into the world. A mark that she had once existed not only in breath, but in words.

But who would read it?

She thought of her cousin’s letter, folded in ash. Of the priest’s even voice. Of Masha, bustling past with her mind full of wedding linens and spring. Her parents, moving from room to room in the unspoken rhythm of aging.

“Why speak?” she thought. “If no one listens. If the listening itself is a kind of silence.”

There had been a time, younger, when she imagined herself a writer. She filled notebooks with half-formed stories, poems that bled emotion too large for her body. She imagined her thoughts one day printed, held by someone else, turned page by page in the lamplight of a distant room. But that vision faded, the way all youthful clarity fades—not with despair, but with distance. She stopped writing not from pain, but from the quiet understanding that her voice was not sought.

And so the pages stopped.

Now, in the winter hush, she wondered again if she might begin. Just for herself. Not to be read, not to be praised, but simply to speak.

But even that thought drifted. Her days passed without reply, and her inner words echoed only inward. She had spoken so long to herself that the idea of writing now felt like carving marks into stone buried beneath snow.

“If I write,” she thought, “will it be like shouting into a forest? The echo returned is still my own voice.”

Still, her fingers brushed the edge of the paper.

“I have so many words,” she thought. “But no destination.”

She lowered her hand and turned from the table. The page remained untouched. A white field in a house full of snow.

The crows came just before dusk. She saw them through the narrow parlor window, dark shapes sweeping low over the field beyond the orchard, their wings sharp against the thick

gray of the sky. There were five, maybe six—never in a line, never still—only weaving, dipping, rising again with that crooked rhythm peculiar to their kind.

Anastasia sat motionless, a shawl wrapped tight around her shoulders, a lukewarm cup of broth untouched in her hands. The snow lay unbroken across the ground, deep and thick, except where the crows had landed and disturbed it. Their black feathers moved like torn cloth against the white.

She had always watched birds. As a girl, she'd followed them in books, drawn them in the margins of letters. Even now, there was something in their gestures that stilled her. The crows especially—how they never lingered, how they seemed to understand departure better than the rest. They came, they fed, they left. With no ceremony, no farewell.

They never looked back.

She watched them hop through the drifts, pecking at unseen things beneath the surface—seeds, scraps, what little winter offered. They called to one another, harsh, brief cries that cut through the still air, not musical but certain. Their voices made no attempt to soften themselves for the listener.

“They know where they are going,” she thought. “And they do not ask permission.”

One lifted from the snow and flew close to the window, its wings beating once—twice—then vanished beyond the barn roof. Another followed. Then the rest, rising with sudden unity, not in panic, not in fear, simply in motion. In continuation.

She followed them with her eyes until the sky claimed them.

Not one turned back.

Anastasia looked down at her hands. The broth had cooled. She set it aside.

In the gathering dark, the field remained untouched once more, and she felt, with a strange calm, that she too had passed through something unseen—called by no one, leaving nothing disturbed.

The day passed with no mention. Her father muttered in the next room about the loose pane in the window. Her mother stirred soup without looking up. The samovar hissed as it always did, regular and indifferent. Outside, the snow had softened, turned to a slow, fine rain that hung in the air like breath that wouldn’t fall.

Only Masha had remembered. She entered the parlor near midday, eyes lowered, a cloth-wrapped bundle in her hands. She set it quietly on the table near the window and said, “It’s nothing, really. Just something I had time for.” Then, with a small nod, she turned and left, her steps light, almost embarrassed.

Anastasia waited until the footsteps faded down the hall before unwrapping it. Inside was a small cake—dark with currants, topped with a thin glaze that had cracked slightly in the cold. It was not festive. It was not adorned. It was simply made. Honest.

She stared at it for a long moment before cutting a piece, placing it on the old porcelain plate with the faded blue rim. She sat at the table in silence, the fork resting between her fingers, untouched.

Thirty-three.

The number hung in her mind, not heavy, not sharp, just unanchored. It felt like any other number, another addition to the row of days that no longer distinguished themselves. She remembered her twelfth birthday, when the garden had been strung with paper ribbons and her father had smiled in the way he no longer did. She remembered twenty, when the silence had begun to settle, when the last letter from anyone her age arrived. Since then, the years had come like snowfall—layer upon layer, no day different from the last.

She took a bite. The cake was dense, a little dry, sweet in a modest, honest way. It filled her mouth with a quiet comfort that felt almost foreign.

"This day is no different," she thought. "The number means nothing. A candle, a note, a song—those only matter if the world bends toward you for a moment. If someone says: *You have passed through time, and I have noticed.*"

But no one said that now. Her name had not been spoken aloud in days. Even her mother had begun addressing her in gestures more than words.

She looked at the small cake again, half-eaten now, the rest of it still wrapped in Masha's cloth. That girl—young, promised, distant—had remembered. Not with celebration, but with decency. And perhaps that was something. Perhaps not.

The rain tapped gently at the window.

Anastasia finished her slice, stood, and carried the plate to the basin. No song, no voice marked the day. The lamp flickered once in a draft.

Another year had passed. And nothing had changed.

The house settled into its evening hush, the hour when the lamps flickered low and the voices of her parents faded to murmurs in distant rooms. The rain had stopped, leaving the windows streaked and the garden glistening in the dim light. Anastasia remained by the cold stove, arms wrapped around herself, her shawl slipping slowly from one shoulder.

She had not prayed in years. Not in the true sense—not with the full weight of hope behind the words. As a child, she had prayed every night, knees against the woven rug, hands clasped tightly, whispering to the darkness above her bed. For health. For love. For recognition. For meaning.

She no longer remembered when the words had stopped.

“I have not lost faith,” she thought. “I have lost conversation.”

It was not that she believed God did not exist. That would be too easy, too clean a cut. It was that God—if He did exist—had become distant, uninterested, or simply deaf. She had called out into the silence for years. The silence had remained. That was all.

No sign. No voice. No softening of the path beneath her feet. No lifting of burden.

Only time.

She had watched others speak of God with comfort, with familiarity. They found Him in bread rising, in childbirth, in recovery from illness. They looked at snowfall and called it mercy. She looked at snowfall and saw cold.

“They speak to Him,” she thought, “as if they are certain He listens.”

For her, there had been no response. Not in joy. Not in sorrow. Not even now, on this quiet, unremembered birthday, with her heart opened not in despair, but in simple, unguarded questioning.

“If He is there,” she wondered, “then why place a soul in a life where it cannot touch?”

She did not expect an answer.

There was no bitterness in her thoughts, only fatigue. She did not curse heaven. She simply felt the space between herself and anything divine had become too vast to cross. She had waited years for the whisper behind silence, the message folded into pain, the sign that her stillness served some unseen purpose.

It never came.

And so she sat now in the near dark, her hands clasped not in prayer, but in habit, resting against her stomach. The silence remained—gentle, familiar, absolute.

Not the absence of God.

Just the absence of reply.

The snow had turned to a fine crust beneath her boots, the kind that cracked softly with each step. It was late afternoon, the sky dimming slowly, not with drama but with the steady hush of midwinter. Anastasia wrapped her shawl tighter and stepped out onto the narrow path leading down into the village, her hands hidden in her sleeves.

The air was cold but still, the kind of stillness that muted sound and made smoke from chimneys hang low before fading. She walked without a purpose—no errand, no meeting, no hour to return by. Her steps were slow, even, her face unreadable.

She passed the smith’s yard first. Sparks leapt briefly from the open doorway, and the steady rhythm of hammer against metal echoed into the street. Inside, the blacksmith's son worked shirtless despite the cold, his broad back glinting with sweat. He didn’t look up.

Farther on, two children played in the snow near the bakery, their laughter sharp in the crisp air. They tossed handfuls of powder into the sky, letting it fall into their open mouths. One of them stumbled, fell, and laughed harder. Their mother, wrapped in layers, stood nearby holding a basket, watching but not intervening. None of them noticed her.

A dog lay curled beside the bakery wall, its fur dusted with snow, its eyes half-closed in sleep. It raised its head as she passed, blinked, then settled back without interest.

She continued.

Past the chapel with its faded blue dome, the priest walked slowly, head bowed, muttering to himself or to the wind—prayers, perhaps. He paused to knock snow from his boots, glanced once in her direction, but did not greet her. His eyes moved past, as if through mist.

She turned onto a narrower path that led behind the grain store. An old woman shoveled snow from her doorstep, muttering under her breath, her breath clouding the air. A man carried a sack of flour on his shoulder, nodding at someone behind her. Voices drifted from the inn, rough and warm, punctuated by the clink of a glass against wood.

She stopped by the well. The rope was frozen stiff. No one was there.

The village continued around her—movement, work, sound, heat—but she passed through it untouched. No eyes followed her. No words reached her. Her feet left prints in the snow, but it seemed no one would notice them.

She walked on, past rows of shuttered windows, chickens picking at the frozen ground, a wagon with a broken wheel resting at an angle in the mud. A child’s mitten lay dropped on the path. A curtain shifted behind a pane of glass. A door creaked open, then closed.

She did not think. She only watched.

Her breath rose in small clouds before her. Her shadow moved beside her. Her feet continued.

And the village remained. Alive, indifferent. As if she were already gone.

That evening, the house felt tighter than usual, as if the walls had drawn closer while she was gone. The lamps cast their dim halos along the corridor, and her parents’ muffled voices drifted from the kitchen—ordinary, unchanging, neither calling nor expecting her. She hung her shawl by the door and stood for a moment, listening to the quiet settle around her.

She wished, suddenly and sharply, for a voice—a single voice—directed toward her with no task behind it, no courtesy, no inquiry masked as concern. Just a word spoken for her sake alone. A sound shaped by someone who wanted nothing from her, who asked nothing in return.

“One voice,” she thought. “Only one.”

But the house remained still. The hours thickened. No one spoke her name.

She went to her room, sat on the edge of the bed, and let her hands fall open on her lap. The air felt stale, dry from the day’s fire, heavy on her skin. A silence too well-known. She rose again, slowly, as if compelled by something older than her thoughts, and walked barefoot to the door.

Outside, the snow lay unbroken across the yard, smooth as untouched fabric. The night sky hung low, a deep gray that swallowed the stars. She stepped out onto the wooden threshold, then onto the snow itself.

The cold struck her at once—clean, sharp, absolute. It rose through her feet like a breath drawn upward, seizing her ankles, her calves, her bones. She stood still. The air bit her cheeks. Her hair stirred in a slow breeze.

For a moment, she felt nothing but the cold.

And then she felt everything.

The sting, the bite, the clarity of it—pain that was not illness, not sorrow, not longing. Just pure sensation. Something real. Something that acknowledged her body as present, alive, capable of answering the world.

The snow compressed under her weight, leaving two pale impressions. Her breath rose in a trembling cloud. Her fingers curled at her sides.

She closed her eyes.

The cold deepened.

“Here I am,” she thought. Not a prayer. Not a plea. Only a simple truth dropped into the silence, like a stone into a still pond.

No echo returned. No voice answered.

But for that moment—brief, stinging, fleeting—the world touched her back.

Spring

The first thaw came with a slow dripping from the eaves, a hesitant rhythm that softened the hard silence winter had held over the village. The snow receded unevenly, leaving patches of dark earth exposed like old bruises. Water ran in thin veins along the path outside the house, carrying twigs, grit, pieces of bark. The ground beneath it all gave slightly when stepped upon—as if waking reluctantly.

Inside, the house smelled of damp wood. A thin stain crept down the corner of the ceiling where the roof had begun to leak during the final storm. Mold bloomed faintly behind the stove, a gray shadow spreading like a quiet warning. The rugs were damp at the edges. The air felt heavy, close.

Her father lay in his room with the shutters half-closed. His breaths came shallow, unsteady, rasping in a way that made the walls seem to listen. He no longer walked the halls. No longer asked after the weather or the post. He stared at the ceiling with a faint look of puzzlement, as if trying to recall the purpose of breathing itself. The doctor had not been summoned. There was no use. His decline had settled into the house like a season.

Anastasia stood at his doorway a long while, not crossing the threshold. His eyes did not shift toward her. He no longer noticed when she entered or left. His hand, resting on the blanket, twitched now and then, as though tugged by some dream he could not name. His face, once stern, was slack and pale. There was no dignity in him now—only the thinning thread of life.

She watched. Then turned away.

Outside, water gathered in shallow pools. Crows picked through the thawing soil, pulling up whatever the winter had hidden. The air smelled faintly of rot and awakening roots. The world was changing around her, shedding its cold layers, pulling at its own seams, preparing for warmth. But none of it stirred her.

She felt no sense of renewal. No rise of hope. Only the quiet sense that the world was shifting to make room for something else—an ending, perhaps. Or the first quiet moment before one. The thaw did not promise life. Only movement.

The house leaked. The mold grew. Her father slipped between breaths.

She walked to the back door, stood on the threshold, and watched the water run along the path in thin, determined streams. The sound was soft. Persistent. Neither mournful nor joyful.

“Something is ending,” she thought. “Or beginning. Or both.”

She did not step outside. She only listened to the water making its steady way downward, cutting small lines into the earth, carving its path with patience, with purpose, with no need for witness.

The earth was wet beneath her knees, heavy with meltwater, still cold beneath the thin crust of early spring. Anastasia knelt in the garden where the rows once ran straight and clean in her mother’s younger years. Now the soil was uneven, clotted, tangled with the remains of last autumn—dead stalks, shriveled roots, curled leaves pressed flat by snow.

She pressed her fingers into it slowly. The soil clung to her skin, black and soft and reluctant. She had brought a handful of seeds in her apron pocket—dry, hard little things, saved from the last crop of beans that had grown properly. She did not know if they would take. The weather was still unsure of itself. The nights froze; the days only hinted at warmth.

She dug with her fingers, gently, making shallow furrows. Her shawl fell from one shoulder as she bent, but she did not pull it back. Her breath was even, steady. A small wind moved the bare apple branches overhead, clicking faintly like bones.

There was no ceremony to what she did. No hope folded into each seed. She did not pray over them, nor think of harvests. She planted as one performs a rite that might mean nothing —but must be done anyway.

She paused.

A vague thought rose—of leaving. Of walking away from the village, from the orchard, from the cold shape of the house. She could take the back road, follow the stream, reach the town before night. And then what? A boarding room, work, nameless faces, unfamiliar streets. She saw it for a moment, that blur of elsewhere. It did not frighten her. Nor did it call.

“To where?” she thought simply. And the question returned nothing. Only silence.

She looked down at her hands in the soil, streaked with dirt, small crescents of earth beneath the nails. Her palms open, her skin rougher than it used to be. No one had touched them in years. No one had asked what they had done. But here they were—working, pressing seed into ground, marking rows.

“I exist,” she thought.

It was not a cry. Not a claim. Just a quiet, grounding truth that settled in her chest, warm and steady.

No one saw her. The garden was empty. The seeds were small. The sky gave no sign.

Still, she covered the rows. Still, she stood and brushed the dirt from her skirts.

The evening settled with a gentleness she had not felt in months. The thaw had slowed, leaving thin rivulets along the path that glimmered faintly in the last of the light. Her father slept without waking. Her mother moved through the house with soft, deliberate steps, tending to small duties that would never truly be finished. The air smelled faintly of damp earth and woodsmoke, the promise of spring still distant but no longer unimaginable.

Anastasia stepped outside and walked to the orchard. The branches were bare, but the bark held a darker sheen now, as if the trees themselves had begun to breathe again. The ground was uneven beneath her boots, soft in places, still frozen in others. Water pooled in shallow dips, reflecting the dim sky.

She stood among the trees, hands resting loosely at her sides, her breath clouding and vanishing. No thoughts pressed at her. No memories rose. There was only the slow shift of the world around her—the quiet, steady turning that asked nothing and gave nothing, yet carried her along all the same.

A single bird—the first she had seen in days—flew from one branch to another, shaking a few droplets from the tips. It wasn't a crow, nor a sparrow. Something small and plain. It chirped once, a brief, unremarkable sound, then went still.

She watched it without expectation.

The house behind her leaned gently against the dusk. The village lay beyond, preparing for the work of spring. Life would continue there, in chores, in births, in small quarrels and small joys. None of it belonged to her. And yet she remained in its shadow, breathing the same cold air, feeling the same slow march of seasons.

She touched the trunk of the nearest tree. Its surface was cold, rough, solid beneath her palm. She felt the faint pulse of sap beginning to wake within it—so slight she might have imagined it.

"I am here," she thought. Not with defiance. Not with longing. Simply as a statement, placed gently into the quiet.

The bird shifted once more. The sky dimmed to blue.

She turned back toward the house, walking slowly, her steps sinking softly into the thawing ground. She did not know what the next day would hold, or the next year, or the years beyond that. She did not expect revelation. She did not wait for change. But as she reached the door, the faint scent of earth clung to her hands, and she did not brush it away.

Inside, the lamp burned low.

Outside, the last of the light slipped behind the orchard.

And in the quiet between them, she remained.